

- 1907–1927 HdG, 6 (1916): 402, no. 878.
 1909 Wrangell: xxx, 129, repro.
 1919 Bode: 30, repro.
 1921b Valentiner: 439, repro.
 1923 Meldrum: 138–139, 200, no. 359.
 1923 Weiner: 148, repro. (German ed.).
 1935 Bredius: 16, 390, repro. (also 1936 English trans.: 16, 390, repro.).
 1941 NGA: 165, no. 75.
 1943 Benesch: 20–33, repro.
 1949 Mellon: 86, no. 75, repro.
 1960 Roger Marx: 65, 305, no. 131, repro.
 1965 NGA: 109, no. 75.
 1966 Bauch: 26, no. 515., repro.
 1966 Clark: 127–130, fig. 120.
 1968 Stufmann: 11–143, no. 372, repro.
 1968 NGA: 96, no. 75, repro.
 1969 Walker: 26, no. 16.
 1969 Gerson/Bredius: 304 repro., 581, no. 390.
 1969 Washington: no. 16.
 1974 Slive: 113.
 1975 Walker: 279, no. 367.
 1975 NGA: 284, no. 75, repro.
 1976–1977 Van de Watering: 33–41, fig. 3.
 1977 Bolten and Bolten-Rempt: 197, no. 452, repro.
 1985 NGA: 329, repro.

1956.1.1 (1443)

Follower of Rembrandt van Rijn

Old Woman Plucking a Fowl

1650/1655

Oil on canvas, 133 x 104.7 (52 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 41 $\frac{1}{4}$)

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Walter Timme

Technical Notes: The medium-weight, plain-weave fabric support consists of two pieces seamed vertically at the left. It has been lined with the tacking margins trimmed. Diagonal marks from a tool used to apply the thick white ground are visible in the x-radiograph. Paint is applied both thickly and thinly in dry opaque pastes, with colored glazes applied over lighter base tones. Dry brushstrokes of varying length create impasto in light areas, such as the feathers. Extensive glazing is employed in dark passages to model forms and shadows, and impart a dark, glowing appearance.

Thin paint layers and glazes, particularly in dark passages, are severely abraded and covered by discolored retouching. The extent of repaint is difficult to determine precisely due to the heavy, discolored surface coating. Other than a relining and a layer of varnish applied in 1957, the painting has not been treated since acquisition (see text for discussion of restorations undertaken prior to acquisition by the National Gallery).

Provenance: Possibly Willem Six, Amsterdam; (possibly sale, Amsterdam, 12 May 1734, no. 170); possibly Wilkins. Possibly John(?) Blackwood; (possibly sale, England, 1752, no. 70).¹ Francis Charteris, Earl of Wemyss [1723–1808];

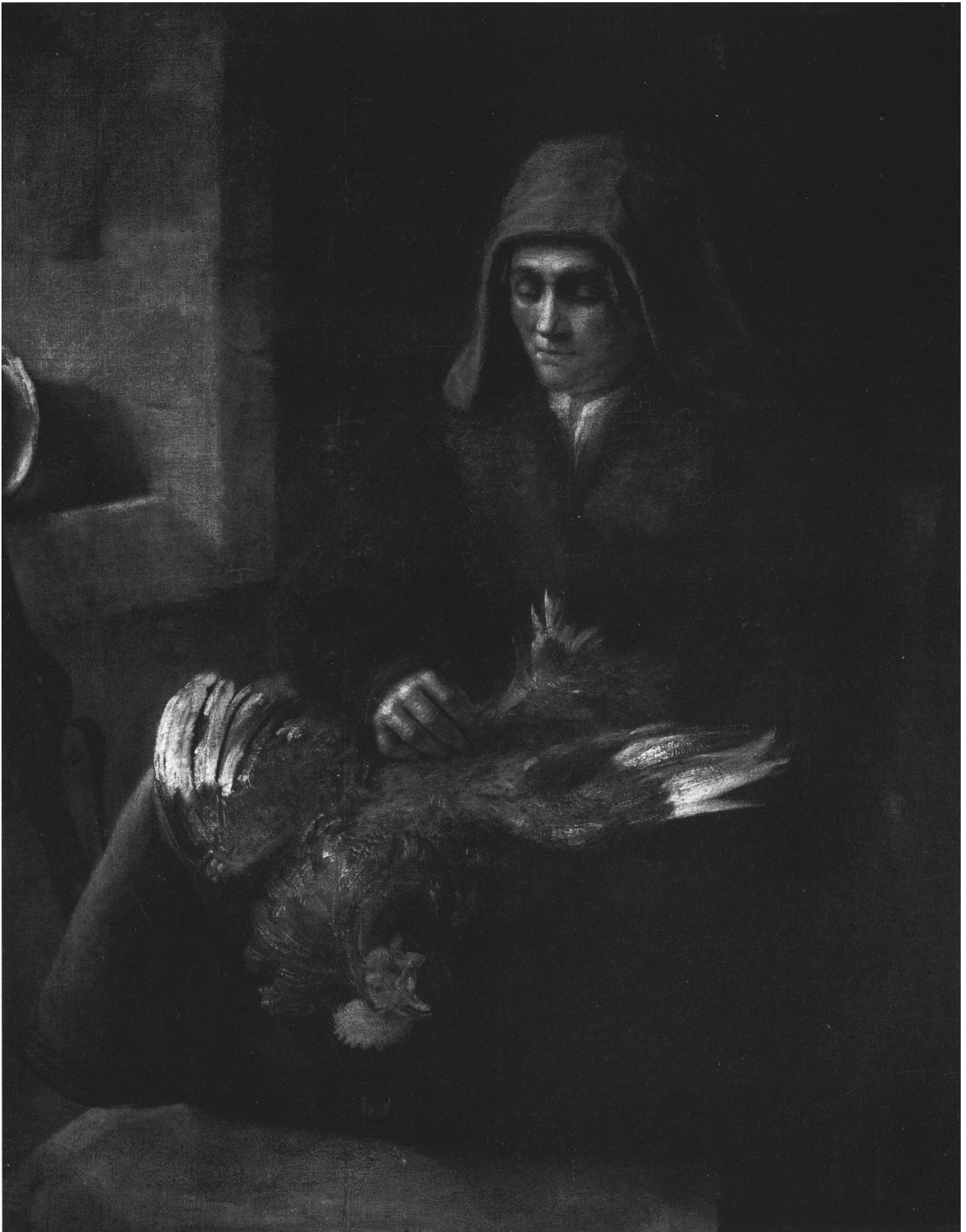
Ralph Willett [1719–1795], Great Canford, Dorset; bequeathed to his cousin, John Willett Adye [d. 1815], who later assumed surname Willett in lieu of Adye; (sale, Peter Cox & Co., London, 31 May 1813, no. 62, bought in); (sale, Christie's, London, 8 April 1819, no. 124); Anthony Stewart [1773–1846], London; Andrew Geddes [1789–1844], London; (sale, London, 12 April 1845, no. 646, bought in); by inheritance to Mrs. Andrew Geddes. Baron de Beurnonville; (sale, Chevalier, Paris, 3 June 1884, no. 295). Madame Levaigreur; (sale, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 2–4 May 1912, no. 24). (F. Kleinberger & Co., Paris and New York);² (sale, American Art Association, New York, 18 November 1932, no. 50); (L. J. Marion); Dr. and Mrs. Walter Timme.

Exhibited: British Institution, London, 1861, no. 17. *Paintings by Rembrandt*, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1930, no. 31.

THE EARLY HISTORY of *Old Woman Plucking a Fowl* is not known with certainty. Traditionally this painting has been associated with a work listed in the 1734 sale of paintings owned by Willem Six, where “Een Hoenderwyf, van Rembrandt” was purchased by Wilkins for 165 fl. (see provenance).³ Wilkins may have brought it to England, for a “*woman plucking a fowl*” by Rembrandt appeared in the Blackwood sale of 1757.⁴ The first secure reference to the painting is from the mid-eighteenth century when Richard Houston (c. 1721–1775) made his mezzotint with an inscription indicating that the painting was in the collection of Francis Charteris, Earl of Wemyss (1723–1808) (fig. 1).⁵

Viewed today, no one would for a moment confuse this painting with a work by Rembrandt; yet an attribution to the master was strongly defended when it surfaced in a Paris sale in 1912. The painting had previously only been known to the most important Rembrandt scholars of the day, Wilhelm von Bode, Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, and Abraham Bredius, through reproductive mezzotints, among them the one made by Houston. The painting's appearance generated much interest, and it was acquired by the Paris dealer Francis Kleinberger for a substantial price. Of the three scholars mentioned above, only Bredius demurred about the attribution, arguing that the painting was a workshop production, one of those paintings listed in Rembrandt's 1656 inventory as being retouched by Rembrandt.⁶ He wrote that the woman “with the strange wrinkles above her left eye and underneath her right eye, with the monotonously painted fur coat and the oddly-shaped hands,” had nothing to do with Rembrandt, but that the fowl was by the master. “You feel his genius in the light he gave to its wings and how the touches in its head make it perfect.”

Bredius' comments initiated an exchange of letters in the *Burlington Magazine* with Kleinberger,



Follower of Rembrandt van Rijn, *Old Woman Plucking a Fowl*, 1956.1.1

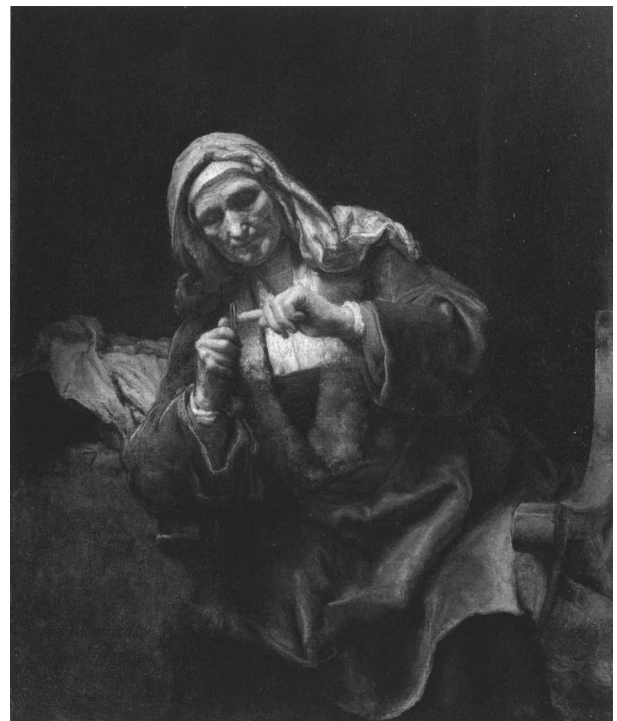


Fig. 1. Richard Houston, engraving of *Old Woman Plucking a Fowl*, mid-18th century, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

who vigorously defended the attribution to Rembrandt.⁷ He pointed out that large areas of the painting had been overpainted by an eighteenth-century restorer before the mezzotint had been made by Houston. Kleinberger added that shortly after acquiring the *Old Woman Plucking a Fowl* he had sent the painting to Berlin to be restored by Professor A. Hauser. Hauser removed overpaint in the background, which revealed the windowsill and gun leaning against it. As Hofstede de Groot also noted, Hauser discovered that the fowl's left wing was overpainted as were both of the woman's hands.⁸ Her costume had also been overpainted. Hofstede de Groot was quite enthusiastic about the changes that had been wrought by Hauser: not only had the woman's expression improved, but also the overall lighting and color harmonies as well. He compared the painting to Rembrandt's *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. A3981) and the *Dead Bittern Held High by a Hunter* (Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, inv. no. 1561), and concluded that this painting likewise must date c. 1638–1640.

Just what transpired in Hauser's studio is unknown. No records have been preserved that allow any judgment about the layers of paint that he removed and the extent of overpainting that he then added.⁹ Valentiner later wrote that Hauser had been forced to reconstruct "essential parts" of the painting, but just what these were has never been determined.¹⁰ If one were to judge the painting as it appears today, it is hard to imagine how anyone, let alone experts of the stature of Bode, Hofstede de Groot, and Valentiner, could have reacted positively to Hauser's restoration. A close comparison with the photograph of the painting published in 1912 after the restoration, however, indicates that a second restoration must have been undertaken before the painting was given to the National Gallery in 1956. Not only has the shape of the headdress once again changed, the costume has lost definition in the folds, and the face and right hand have been heavily overpainted. The Rembrandt signature is also far less visible today than it was in 1912. With all of these layers of restoration, it is virtually impossible to determine the original character of the image. The sole exception is the dead fowl on the woman's lap,

Fig. 2. Attributed to Karel van der Pluym, *Woman Cutting Her Nails*, 1648, oil on canvas, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913



which seems to have survived fairly well intact.

The vigorous execution of this animal does reveal a boldness of touch that provides a glimpse of the qualities that the rest of the painting may originally have possessed.¹¹ While the dry brushwork used to suggest the feathers on the bird's body are, in fact, quite different in character from Rembrandt's handling of similar areas in the Rijksmuseum painting of the dead peacocks, a similar technique is found in the work of one of Rembrandt's pupils and followers from the early 1650s, Karel van der Pluym (1625–1672). A particularly close comparison is found in the brushwork on the armor of *Mars* in Leichtenstein, a painting convincingly attributed to Van der Pluym by Sumowski and dated to the early 1650s, after the artist had left Rembrandt's workshop and returned to Leiden.¹² If one were to extrapolate, moreover, from the general compositional format, large scale, and figure type, what the image might originally have looked like, a painting generally attributed to Van der Pluym, *Woman Cutting Her Nails* (fig. 2), once again serves as an excellent point of reference.¹³ Here one finds the same deep-set eyes, square face, and blocky hands. Even the thick, heavy fur-lined cloak is comparable.

The information available, however, is not sufficient to attribute this heavily overpainted work to Van der Pluym. Neither of the comparisons mentioned above is signed or dated, so their attributions to Van der Pluym should be understood as tentative. Moreover, other artists in the Rembrandt circle during the 1650s, Gerrit Willemsz. Horst (1612–1652), Abraham van Dijck (1635–1672), Heyman Dullaert (1636–1684), and Willem Drost (active 1650s), also painted large-scale, blocky figures that are comparable to the woman in *Old Woman Plucking a Fowl*. Indeed, a painting of this subject by Drost belonged to an Amsterdam collector in the 1670s.¹⁴ Despite the admirable efforts of Sumowski and others to construct a body of works for these painters, too little is presently known about their artistic personalities to make a precise judgment about the attribution of this work.¹⁵

Notes

1. This information comes from a two-volume manuscript in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, containing transcripts of catalogues. The information in these volumes is partially examined by Simpson 1953, 42.
2. Kleinberger 1912a reconstructs much of the earlier provenance of this painting.
3. I would like to thank Quint Gregory for helping reconstruct this provenance.
4. Simpson 1953, 42.
5. The provenance of this painting was confused by

HdG 1907–1927, 6: 176–177, cat. 298, with that of another work owned by the Marchese Riccardi in Florence, where it was exhibited in 1737 and 1767. A description of the Riccardi painting in 1764 by Edward Gibbon clearly indicates that the composition was different. Gibbon 1764 (1961), 205, visited the Riccardi Palace in Florence on 10 August 1764 and saw:

Un Rembrandt. Une Vielle femme qui deplume une poule. Quel sujet mais quelle verité dans l'exécution. La Nature elle même ne rendroit pas mieux la Vielle-elle-même, les plumes de la poule, la corbeille où elle les reçoit et le chauderon où elle doit la cuire....

The Riccardi painting may have been acquired by Sir William Forbes, who bought many of his paintings in Italy. In the sale of his collection on 2 June 1842 he lists *An Old Woman Plucking a Fowl* by Rembrandt that had come from the collection of Count Lecchi at Brescia. The painting's dimensions were listed as 5 ft. 9 in. by 5 ft. 1 in. (175.3 x 154.9 cm), substantially larger than the painting in the National Gallery. This painting then may have passed into the collection of Lord Clinton, who exhibited a work of this description in Edinburgh in 1883. This painting's current location is not known.

6. Bredius 1912a, 164. None of the paintings so listed in the inventory, however, can be specifically identified with this work. See Strauss and Van der Meulen 1979, 349–388, doc. 1656/12.

7. Kleinberger 1912a, 296–297.

8. Hofstede de Groot 1912, 178–180.

9. Partial x-radiographs of the painting exist (head, left hand, and dead fowl). They reveal that the surface is very worn, suggesting that the eighteenth-century overpainting was necessitated by reasons of condition rather than those of aesthetics.

10. Valentiner 1923, pl. 50: "dabei wurden einzelne wesentliche Teile ergänzt."

11. As late as 1966 Jakob Rosenberg still maintained that the dead fowl had been painted by Rembrandt (letter, 25 April 1966, in NGA curatorial files).

12. Sumowski 1983, 4: 2364, cat. 1592b, 2374 repro.

13. Sumowski 1983, 4: 2365, cat. 1595, 2377 repro. Bernhard Schnackenburg, in Berlin 1991, 371, however, argues that the painting is too good for Van der Pluym, and attributes it to Nicolaes Maes (q.v.), and dates it c. 1650. I find the attribution to Maes unconvincing.

14. Bredius 1912/1913, noted that in 1676 "een hoenderwyff van Drost" was in the Spaarsoogh Collection in Amsterdam.

15. Sumowski 1983, 2: 1387–1417, discusses Horst; Sumowski 1983, 1: 666–711, discusses Van Dyck; and Sumowski 1983, 1: 652–665, discusses Dullaert.

References

- 1829–1842 Smith, 7 (1836): 70, no. 164.
1881 Dutuit, 3: no. 385.
1897–1906 Bode, 8 (1906): 158, no. 18, repro.
1907–1927 HdG, 6 (1916): 176–177, no. 298.
1912 R. E. D.: 113.
1912 "Sales in May": 122.
1912a Bredius: 164–169, repro.
1912a Kleinberger: 296–297, repro. on 248.
1912b Bredius: 359–360.
1912b Kleinberger: 49–50.
1912 Bredius and Kleinberger: 121–122.

- 1912 "Rembrandt's Woman Plucking": 138.
 1912 Hofstede de Groot: 173–188, 174, 178–181, repro.
 1912 Bode: 504–508, repro.
 1913 Bredius: 273–276.
 1930b Valentiner: 3–84, 4, repro.
 1931 Valentiner: no. 67, pl. 67.
 1965 NGA: 111, no. 1443.
 1968 NGA: 98, no. 1443, repro.
 1975 NGA: 292–293, no. 1443, repro.
 1985 NGA: 335, repro.

1942.9.64 (660)

Follower of Rembrandt van Rijn

Head of an Aged Woman

1655/1660

Oil on oak, 21.1 x 17.5 (8¼ x 6¾)

Widener Collection

Inscriptions

At center left: *Rembrandt/f.1657*

Technical Notes: The support is a single, uncradled oak board with a vertical grain, cut from a tree felled between 1637 and 1643.¹ A vertical split caused a dislevel in the panel at the top edge in the center. A small, 1.3 x 0.5 cm, loss of paint and ground layers occurred there when the wood surface was mechanically planed. The left and right edges appear to have been planed, slightly reducing the panel's horizontal dimensions.

A thin, smooth, white ground layer covering the panel lies under a reddish brown imprimatura layer. This layer, which must have been left as a reserve for the woman's robe, is still visible in that area. Paint was applied freely with very loose brushwork, considerable impasto, and rapid scumbles. Paint was worked wet into wet in rapid succession, with the face painted first, followed by the background. Small losses are found in the dark background at the right and along the edges, and mild abrasion has occurred in the thin, dark passages. The painting was cleaned in 1992. At that time overpaint removed from the dark right background revealed a pentimento in the placement of the woman's shoulder.

Provenance: Probably H. Verschuring, The Hague, by 1751.² Gottfried Winkler, Leipzig, by 1765. Possibly with Stephen Bourgeois, Paris, c. 1893.³ Rodolphe Kann [d. 1905], Paris, by 1898; (Duveen Brothers, London, in 1907);⁴ (F. Kleinberger & Co., Paris, in 1909); Léonardus Nardus [1868–1930], Suresnes, France.⁵ Peter A. B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, by 1911; inheritance from Estate of Peter A. B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park.

Exhibited: *Rembrandt: schilderijen bijeengebracht ter gelegenheid van de inbuldiging van Hare Majesteit Koningin Wilhelmina*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1898, no. 100. Washington 1969, no. 8.



Fig. 1. X-radiograph of 1942.9.64

INFORMAL bust-length figure studies, called *tronies* in the seventeenth century, were frequently painted by Rembrandt and members of his workshop.⁶ This small oil sketch of a wizened old woman is a painting of this type. The sitter stares out from under a white headpiece, her black cape fastened at the neck. The woman's creased and wrinkled visage is expressed with dense paints vigorously applied with a stiff brush. At the edge of the strokes are crisp and definite ridges, a characteristic of *alla prima* painting that is also evident in the x-radiograph (fig. 1). This technique is particularly apparent along the decorative pattern at the lower edge of the headpiece, which has been created by pushing a firm object, perhaps even a firm brush, into the wet paint. In contrast to the thick impastos on the face and headpiece, the black cape is thinly painted and summarily indicated. Surprisingly, the background is vigorously painted, particularly in the upper region. The paint in the background around the head is actually thicker than that of the thinly executed black cape.

The attribution of this painting to Rembrandt dates to at least 1765, when it was engraved in reverse